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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000110

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: DEMOGRAPHICS OF IRAQIS IN SYRIA

REF: NEA/ELA OI 1/29

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (SBU) Summary: There is little reliable data about the demographic makeup of Iraqis in Syria. There is growing evidence (and intensified SARG efforts to gather it), however, indicating the numbers may be significantly higher than previously estimated 800,000 Iraqis (perhaps more than 1 million). Despite its flaws, UNHCR's March 2006 socio-economic survey is the best estimate that exists so far on the demographic breakdown of Iraqis in Syria: 57 percent Shia, 21 percent Sunni, 20 percent Christian, and a small number of others. Iraqis have come here in such large numbers because of the relative absence of entry restrictions and the low cost of living. There are indications that the SARG is on the verge implementing measures that could severely restrict the numbers of Iraqis taking refuge in Syria. End Summary

12. (SBU) In response to queries from Washington about the make-up of displaced Iraqis in Syria, we offer the following:

-- There are no reliable statistics about the demographic breakdown of Iraqis in Syria. There are reports of a recently begun SARG survey of the Iraqi population, with preliminary numbers suggesting much higher concentrations of Iraqis than previously believed. The first predominantly Iraqi Shia neighborhood of Damascus to be surveyed held 300,000 persons, according to the local Internet news agency Syriasteps. Other Damascus neighborhoods have yet to be canvassed, but could lead to estimated totals of 1.3 million Iraqis in Syria, according to the news agency report. Post is following up for further details of the study's findings and its methodology.

-- UNHCR figures provide limited insights on the demographics of Syria's Iraqi population. Between December 2003 and January 17, 2007, UNHCR registered 41,831 individual Iraqis, out of the at least estimated 800,000 Iraqis believed as of December 2006 to be in Syria. Of those, 36 percent are Christian; 32 percent are Sunni; 23 percent are Shia; and 9 percent are Sabians (an obscure pre-Islamic sect), according to UNHCR. (Comment: UNHCR does not think that these numbers reflect the overall makeup of the Iraqi community here, but rather that they reflect the degree to which each group thinks UNHCR will help its members resettle in a third country. End Comment.)

-- UNHCR's March 2006 survey estimated 450,000 displaced Iraqis in Syria, using limited demographic data from limited household surveys and somewhat questionable Ministry of Interior figures. That survey concluded that 57.2 percent of the families here were Shia; 21.2 percent were Sunni; 15.4 percent were Catholic; 1.5 percent were Sabian; 4.2 percent were Orthodox Christian; and .6 percent fell in the "Other" category.

-- Our understanding is that many Iraqis come here because, up until very recently, there have been no entry restrictions like that on other neighboring Arab countries. Iraqis could stay for three months, and then request an in-country extension for another three months. There have been rumors for the past two weeks, increasing in frequency and reliability, however, of a new SARG policy that limits stays of Iraqis to 15 days, requiring them to leave the country for up to a month before reentering for another 15 days. Such a policy would be presumably be aimed at shutting off the heavy flow of Iraqis to Syria that has been evident in the last year or more.

-- Additionally, Iraqis come here because Syria is seen to have a lower cost of living than other countries in the region. The SARG has also opened its schools to Iraqi children and granted Iraqis access to public health care, although the regime began limiting medical services in Damascus at the start of 2006. Additionally, although Iraqis are not legally permitted to work here, we understand that SARG authorities generally turn a blind eye to working Iraqis.

-- Finally, Syria has been seen as a good jumping off point to other countries in the region, such as Egypt that has reportedly been generous in opening its doors to people who

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for example have medical emergencies.

13. (C) Comment: UNHCR's March 2006 socio-economic survey is the most detailed estimate--but not necessarily an accurate one--that exists so far on the demographic breakdown of Iraqis in Syria: 57 percent Shia; 21 percent Sunni, and 20 percent Christian, and insignificant numbers of "others." UNHCR has told us that throughout the Iraq conflict, they have seen what they consider to be a disproportionate numbers of Christian, who began arriving to Syria soon after the start of hostilities, because of persecution in Iraq and because they believed they had stronger prospects for resettlement in third countries. Hopefully, the ongoing SARG survey and a separate one proposed by UNHCR will give us stronger indications of the make-up of Iraqi communities here.
CORBIN